

LIFEGROUP LESSON



"Drawing Near to God"

PRAYER – A Heart-to-Heart Talk with God

2 Chronicles 20:5-12, Psalm
66:16-17, Matthew 6:9-15



TIPS FOR DISCUSSION FACILITATOR

Ensure that the aim is first to understand the text and then to make it meaningful and relevant. The discussion questions provided are intended to bring out the relevance for today.

Begin with a prayer for the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Encourage everyone to participate in the discussion.

Begin the discussion by reading the sermon passage (where applicable), and discuss about its overall meaning by asking what could be the key focuses/emphases in that particular passage.

Spend appropriate amount of time on each question with as many members as possible making a contribution. At the end of each discussion the leader should summarise the main points that have arisen and direct the group towards making them applicable in their individual lives.

A balance must be kept between ascertaining what the Bible teaches and what are the opinions of participants. So the facilitator should make sure that there is an understanding of the passage before questions are raised.

TOPIC OUTLINE

1. We need to know who we are praying to
2. We should focus on the heart behind the prayers
3. We can learn what and how to pray

Making Sense of Prayer

(Adapted from Tyndale Bible Dictionary)

Prayer is the addressing and petitioning of God. A classic definition of Christian prayer is "an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies" (Westminster Shorter Catechism). Christian prayer is the end product of a long process of change and development in God's relation to people, as a survey of the biblical data shows.

In the beginning, newly created humans, made for fellowship with God, lived in close communion with him. Sin broke this intimate, direct relationship. Nevertheless through God's initiation, the unique relationship between the covenant partners was open again. Abraham's prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18) is a striking combination of boldness and persistence and is a recognition of his own smallness and inferiority compared to God. Biblical prayer is characterized by the reality that there is a distance between the Creator and the creature due to human sin, bridged only by God's grace. The basis of a person's approach to God in prayer is God's gracious initiative, the establishing of the covenant, and the promise of help and deliverance on the basis of that covenant. It is this covenant relationship that gives the warrant for prayer. Thus, in prayer was typically conjoined with sacrifice and obedience.

The New Testament's teaching on prayer is dominated by Christ's own example and teaching. His dependence on his Father in his mediatorial work expresses itself in repeated prayer, culminating in his High Priestly prayer (John 17) and the agony of Gethsemane with the prayer from the cross. His teaching on prayer, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, is to be understood as contrasting with the Jewish practices at that time, not with Old Testament ideals. Prayer is an expression of sincere desire. It is not to inform God of matters that he would otherwise be ignorant of, and the validity of prayer is not affected by length or repetitiveness. After the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the early church is characterized by prayer (Acts 2:42) under the leadership of the apostles (Acts 6:4). The church praises God for the gift of his Son and his Spirit, and petitions God in times of difficulty (Acts 4:24; 12:5, 12).

The Christian's prayer is thus rooted objectively, in Christ's intercession; and subjectively, in the enabling of the Holy Spirit. Because we have Christ as our superior High Priest who is able to sympathize with us, the church is encouraged to come to God boldly, to find grace when it is needed (Hebrews 4:14-16; 10:19-23).

Discussion for Point 1: We need to know who we are praying to (2 Chronicles 20:5-12).

- Our beliefs about God's character influence our prayers and the way we relate with Him. From Jehoshaphat's prayers in 2 Chronicles 20:5-12, what do you think are his beliefs about who God is? Consider your own prayer life carefully. How do you think it reflects your personal beliefs about God? The list below gives contrasting descriptions of how believers might perceive God:
 - o Unlimited versus Limited
 - o Approachable versus Distant
 - o Giving versus Demanding
 - o Willing versus Unwilling
 - o Relational versus Transactional

While we can rather easily identify the right descriptions of God, there might be instances when we lean towards the opposite in the way we think about Him. Share an encounter you have that reflects such an experience. How do you think we can develop the right way to view God?

Discussion for Point 2: We should focus on the heart behind the prayers (Psalm 66:18-19).

- In human relationship, attitudes such as trust and willingness to listen help in our communication with people. What attitudes do you think are necessary in order to have a vibrant prayer life? Conversely, what are some attitudes that can hinder your prayers? Read Matthew 21:21-22 and James 5:15. Why do you think God honours a prayer made in faith? James 4:3 talks about some wrong motives in prayers. On top of this, what do you think are other possible wrong motives believers may have in their prayers? On the other hand, what are the right motives we should have?

Discussion for Point 3: We can learn how and what to pray (Matthew 6:9-15)

- Prayers can be made anytime, anywhere, and in all forms; either as an intuitive outcry for God's help or as an extended time of intercessions and petitions. As we mature, our prayer life will grow in depth and breadth. On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being a very deep prayer life), how would you rate your own prayer life? Give reasons for your assessment. Why do you think it is important for believers to have a strong prayer life? What are some obstacles believers may face that hinder them from developing a deep and consistent prayer life?

Paul encouraged us in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to pray unceasingly, i.e. consistently and persistently. How do you think you can put this into practice in your prayer life? What are some adjustments you might need to make so that you can develop a more consistent prayer life?

- Bringing our needs to God form a large part of most of our prayers. What other things do you talk to God about in your prayers? Why do you think it is important that we can approach God in different ways and for different things? What can believers who feel that they do not have much to pray about do?

Read Matthew 6:9-15. What are some things Jesus taught us to pray about? Prayers can also be made privately and in a group setting. Why do you think public prayers are important to the faith community? What are some prayers you have heard that have left an impression on you? What do you think it was about those prayers that struck you?

*"This is the confidence we have in approaching God;
that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.
And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask –
we know that we have what we asked of him.*

~ 1 John 5:14 ~

Appendix A (For general reading and reflection)

How is Your Prayer Life?

How is your prayer life? Is prayer your first response for all thoughts and encounters in your life? If not, we need to examine why not!

By Dr. Richard J. Krejcir,

(Adapted from Discipleship Tools, <http://www.discipleshiptools.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=37692&columnid=156>)

Have you ever thought through why you do not spend more time with God? What aspects of your time and commitment hold you back from prayer? Most of us do not have the kind of prayer life we should have; in my experience, most people give up because either they do not know how to pray or they do not understand the significance of prayer. Others may have prayer lives but they are not godly or effectual prayers; these tend to be the prayers with only the self-interests or personal agendas in mind. We may know about prayer, but is our understanding and practice lined up to Christ as Lord, or to what we want? One might presume that a Christian in a church automatically knows how and why to pray, but few are ever taught the power, relevance, and importance of prayer. Therefore, we go on presumptions and perhaps even model our prayers after someone else, not from what God has communicated to us.

The purpose of prayer is not just to get what we want; it is lining ourselves up with His thoughts, ways, and precepts. The focus of our prayers is Christ, His work, and His impact on you, your family, and the world. This is what the Lord's Prayer is about (Luke 11:1-4). The main theme of prayer is our vital connection with God as Lord and Savior, and His empowering us for all we do in life. He is sovereign; He directs our lives as well as the rest of the universe, so we must get in tune with Him. We must lean on and dwell in Him so we are infused with His Way rather than clouded and distracted by our ways or the ways of the world.

If prayer is our connection with God, then to ignore prayer means we are trying to put God out of our lives. When we misuse prayer, we are usurping God's authority and missing out on His best for us. We are treating God like a pet, giving Him the time and affection when it is convenient for us, when it fits our needs, concerns, and occasion. God must come first and prayer helps us make this happen. Prayer is one of, if not the most quintessential important aspect of the Christian life. Prayer needs to be number one for the serious Christian to whom Jesus is not merely Savior but also LORD. However, to make entreaty (deep prayer) with God our first priority, we must first receive His redemptive work through the power of the Spirit. Once we have received His amazing gift, and His work is transforming and renewing us (Rom. 12:1-3), prayer becomes our response to Him, and helps us continually commune His Work within us.

Do we truly understand the power, significance, and eminence of prayer? If not, why not? What is in the way of prayer being more momentous in our lives? We need to ask ourselves, what has happened in my life and how am I responding in prayer to my connection to God? What will it take to become more of a person who has "heartfelt prayer" at my core; what will it take for me to be a "prayer warrior," whose life goal is to make Christ first in all things? The prerequisite to this type of effective, prayer warrior prayer is consistency and growth in our prayers. In conjunction, we learn about prayer and life in general from spending time with Him and His Word, and by continually growing in that prayer life. We also become better equipped to handle all that comes our way.

Prayer helps us see the great expectations He has for us, but this insight does not come about all at once. As with any growth, it is gradual. Prayer is something that does not just happen overnight; it is like planting a seed that germinates, grows, matures, and then produces its fruit. The seed alone does not produce the fruit; it is only after its growth and development from its time in the sun, the water and fertilizer, and its care and cultivation that brings about its bountiful harvest. It is the same with our growth in Christ! Prayer develops as we consistently obey Christ. It is watered by the fertilizer of His Word. The care and cultivation comes from effective, godly teachers. Our nurturing and learning feeds our roots in Him. If we negate our cultivation of prayer, we are negating Christ in our life and the result will be a very slow growth, perhaps even retardation in our spiritual formation. Prayer needs attention and constant tending for effectual growth.

Prayer helps create more of itself. Prayer begets more prayer and that begets greater spiritual formation. When our prayers are not just self-focused but engage others as well, our Christian walk becomes deeper, more relevant, and heartfelt. Heartfelt prayer is the sense of passion and urgency that needs to come before progress can take place. This is where prayer becomes more real and transfers into an authentic connection with God, not just regarding Him as a vending machine for meeting our desires.

Our prayer life grows when we plow the field and plant the seed so it can grow. We must plow away the weeds of our selfishness along with the things in life that distract and obstruct us. This must take place to bring more nourishment into our soil from His presence, so the seeds of our faith can grow into the mustard tree of maturity and service. We have to know God and His Word first; then we will know the importance of worship and faith development that fuels our prayer that in turns fuels our worship of God and connection with others.

Prayer is reciprocal, as it needs to be a perennial and continual attitude that begets a perpetual, continuous, constant action; thus, prayer is a ceaseless relationship we have with God and that echoes in eternity. Prayer begets our character and maturity and, in turn, our character and maturity help spur on our prayer life. Learning about God and worshipping Him brings us closer to His presence and makes our prayers deeper and more alive.

Passion that honors Christ synergizes our prayer life; it forms from our realization of who He is and what He has done for us. Passion increases prayer from explorations, curiosity, or perhaps a selfish mindset, to a vigorous lifestyle. Prayer becomes more continual and effective as we build on our growing relationship in Him. Thus, the characteristics of knowing Christ, worshipping Him, learning more about Him, and practicing prayer through the work of the Holy Spirit fuel the growth of our prayer life. Then those characteristics back flow to cause each one of them to work synergistically better.

Consequently, as our prayer life grows, so does our worship and learning of Christ. As our relationship grows, our gifts and skills grow, our meaning and purpose in life grows, and so forth (2 Peter 1:5-9). Therefore, more prayer will cause us to be more passionate, have deeper worship experiences, become better leaders, develop more knowledge, maturity, and character, and become better servants and friends.

Questions to Ponder

Read Luke 3:21; 5:16, remember, Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

1. How is your prayer life? Is prayer your first response for all thoughts and encounters in your life? If not, we need to examine why not!
2. Have you ever thought through why you do not spend more time with God? How can you better respond in prayer to your connection to God?
3. What aspects of your time and commitment hold you back from prayer?
4. Why is prayer not about what we want? Why would people think it is? The purpose of prayer is not just to get what we want, so what is the reason we are to pray?
5. How can prayer help you be lined up to Christ as Lord? How does His impact on you affect your impact on your family, and the world? (This is what the Lord's Prayer is about).
6. Do you truly understand the power, significance, and eminence of prayer? If not, why not?
7. What will it take to become more of a person who has "heartfelt prayer" at your core? What will it take for you to be a "prayer warrior," whose life goal is to make Christ first in all things?
8. How will prayer help your growth in Christ? How does the practice of prayer build much heartier relationships with others? How can you improve your prayer life?
9. What are you going to do about your prayer life now?